

## **The International Economic History Association in the mirror of its Past.**

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### 1. Introduction

Next year it will be half a century since economic historians decided to have their own gatherings in a format, separate from the world congresses, the latter traditionally being organized every five years by the International Committee of the Historical Sciences. It was a splendid idea of Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson to commemorate, in a special session at the Utrecht conference, this anniversary by looking at the International Economic History Association in the mirror of its Past, and to evaluate its contribution to economic-historical research.

Peter Mathias and Jean-François Bergier are crucial witnesses of the origins of the Association and of its growth during the following years. Their papers are full proof of the importance of their memories and of their personal contribution to the successful development of the Association. I myself attended, up to now, all the congresses, organized by the Association, except for the first one in Stockholm. I also served the Association, as a member of the Executive Committee, from 1968 to 2002. My memories, therefore, will be, chronologically, more limited than those of Mathias and Bergier: they will focus mainly on the period from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1990s.

I will subdivide the paper into three parts. In the first part I shall try to summarize the way in which the scientific organization of the Association and the format of its congresses have evolved from the simple structure we started out with into the more complex one, we had in 1998, date of the decision to change the statutes substantially, including the format of the congresses. The second part of my overview attempts to indicate the fundamental shifts in subject matter, which have taken place during the same period and to explain these shifts. Finally, I will give a brief summary of the circumstances, which generated the decision at the Madrid conference of 1998 to change the statutes of the Association and the organizational format of its congresses.

### 2. The scientific organization of the International Economic History Association and its congresses (1960-1998)

The International Economic History Association was formally founded, as has already been said, at the conference of Munich in 1965. In the beginning its structure was very simple. The Association had only national associations as its members, no individuals. As Christof Glamann indicates in his paper, the attribution of the votes in the General Assembly and the constitution of the Executive Committee reflected yesterday's world inasmuch as it featured a 'great powers' rule, resembling that of the UN Security Council: the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain and France were each guaranteed and allowed to fill two places on the General Assembly and on the Committee, the proposals of candidates being made by the national associations of the four countries or their equivalents and to be confirmed by the General Assembly. The other seats, originally five in number, but later to be extended to ten, were 'free', i.e. they were the only ones chosen by the unfettered vote of all members who had

voting rights in the General Assembly, the candidates being proposed by members of the General Assembly, later by the Executive Committee, on the basis of their personal scientific merits. In the 1980s the maximum of tenure for members of the Executive Committee was limited to two terms of four years, the Honorary Presidents remaining member, but without voting rights. In the course of the 1990s, moreover, the system of two seats for the four countries, mentioned above, was abolished.

The organization of a congress was entrusted by the General Assembly to a member of the Executive Committee, who had proposed the town, where the congress would take place, and who had committed himself to be responsible, materially and financially, for bringing the realization of the event to a good end. If the proposal was accepted, the organizer of the congress was elected President of the Association for the years, preceding the congress. In the beginning, the Association organized two congresses every five years, one during the same year of the world congresses of the Historical Sciences, the other in between. From the congress of 1970 in Leningrad onwards, the General Assembly decided to organize the congresses every four years, not taking into account anymore a parallelism with the World Congresses.

In the beginning the structure of the congresses was kept very simple. The Executive Committee selected a few main themes, requested widely known senior experts to write a general report on each of the selected themes, and then invited a number of specialists to subject the individual reports to critical examination. In addition, the Committee invited a number of young researchers to give a short account of their current investigations, insofar as these were related to the main themes.

From 1974 onwards, at the Congress of Copenhagen and at the initiative of Christof Glamann, President at that moment, the format of the congresses was reorganized substantially. Henceforth, the scientific activities were to be classified under three specific headings. The '*A*' sessions, under the heading '*Debates and Controversies*', were to review the state of research on themes of broad international interest and with a slant on current development in the Economic Sciences. The '*B*' sessions were to bring together the results of current research by scholars from several countries on a number of major themes, which for some years were already studied in depth. The '*C*' sessions were to be devoted to informal workshops on themes, where scientific interest was growing, or on themes where research was just taking off: the purpose of these sessions was to stimulate international cooperation and to launch within that framework new international research campaigns. At the Leuven congress in 1990 a final innovation was added. In order to encourage doctoral research in Economic History, '*D*' sessions were introduced, young scholars, who had recently completed a PhD-thesis, being invited to submit a summary of their methods and results to a jury, nominated by the Executive Committee. 24 candidates were selected to present their thesis at the Congress and four of them were honored with a Prize of the Association. The selection of proposals for the '*A*', '*B*' and '*C*' sessions was made by the Executive Committee in function of their meeting the criteria specified for each of them, as indicated above. The new format proved so successful that the European Economic Association took over the formula for organizing their congresses.

Another initiative deserving a special mention was that taken by Jean-François Bergier and his Swiss colleagues, who were organizing the Berne Congress of 1986. They created a fund to award grants to persons, who would not otherwise have been able to participate in the congress. The initiative enabled a number of young and senior scholars from developing countries to attend the Berne meeting. The Leuven

organizing committee took over the idea and expanded the fund, making it possible to give grants to 40 scholars from the developing world and 80 scholars from Eastern and Central-Eastern Europe. Roberto Cordes Conde expanded it still further for scholars from South-America.

### 3.Changes in Subject Matter during the period 1960-2000.

In the second part I will give an overview of the shifts over time in subject matter at the congresses. In the beginning the congresses were inspired by two main streams in the discipline: by the Anglo-Saxon school, in which long-term economic growth played a leading part, and by the French '*Annales*' school, in which regional development and global history prevailed. The major themes at the first congresses, therefore, focused on themes such as *Industrialization and Economic Growth; Uneven Regional Development; Planning; Income Distribution, Agriculture as a Factor of Long-term Economic Growth*, the latter theme inspired by Neo-Malthusian interpretations and introducing Historical Demography.

The Leningrad Congress of 1970 was significant for two reasons. The first had to do with ideology. Soviet Marxist ideology permeated some themes and reports, but at the same time an open discussion and dialogue between historians from East and West took place. It was a first indication that economic historians, rising above ideologies, could meet each other in a mutual search for historical truth. A second significant feature was the fact that, for the first time, problems of a methodological nature were given a central position in the program. Comparative History, the automated processing of a quantitative data-bank, and the application of methods from the Positive Sciences each came under discussion. Within this framework *The New Economic History*, which was at the time all the rage in the United States, conquered an important place in the methodological sessions.

The Copenhagen congress in 1974 not only was a mile-stone with regard to structure, it also inaugurated a clear shift in subject matter. In society interest in the problems of natural resources, environment and modern management was growing and was translated into new themes. The 'A' themes, in particular, were linked ever more closely with current events and with resulting research in the Social Sciences, a clear example being the 'A' theme on '*Natural Resources*' at the Edinburgh congress, organized by Peter Mathias, as a response to Denis Meadows's provocative report on '*The Limits of Growth*'.

Another effect of the increasing interest of linking the themes of sessions more closely with current economic developments, was the relative stagnation of themes, concerning the Economic History of the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times, and the growing importance of themes concerning the Modern and Contemporary Period. At the Leuven Congress in 1990 nearly 70 per cent of the sessions were already related to Modern and Contemporary History, only 20 per cent to the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times, the remaining 10 per cent being devoted to methodological questions and other subjects spanning all periods. Thus, one thing is clear: the scientific approach towards our discipline was more and more being influenced by a desire that research should be relevant to current social and economic problems. A few striking examples of this tendency are themes on *Women in the Labor Force;*

*Education; Debt; Ethnic Minority Groups; Pollution; Oil; Multinational Enterprise; Globalization; Disease and Medicine; International Finance.*

Another factor, contributing to the shifts in congress themes, was linked with the geographical extension of the discipline since the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Economic History crossed its traditional European, North-American and Japanese boundaries and became firmly established in Australia and New Zealand, soon after also in Latin America, on the Asian continent and in some African countries. This extension was re-orienting the sessions towards new, non-traditional themes, geographically different as well as for its topics.

#### 4. The Crisis of the Association in 1998: its Origins and Consequences

In the last part of my overview I will focus on the circumstances which, during the crisis of the Association in 1998, lead to the decision to change the statutes and the format of the congresses. As a member of the Executive Committee and as Chairman of the Selecting Committee, which had to propose to the Executive Committee and to the General Assembly the names of the scholars who would replace the retiring members of the Executive Committee, and the changes at the top of the Association, I was in a privileged position to follow the events and the problems connected with it. My remarks, therefore, based upon my personal diary, can be useful for the history of our Association.

The crisis erupted at the Congress of Madrid in 1998, but, in fact, was preceded by a long incubation period. Four circumstances of frustration among some member-countries during the previous months, and even years, determined the eruption. A first circumstance was the geographical extension of the discipline outside of Europe. As was already mentioned above, interest in Economic History was growing fast, in particular in the United States and Japan, but also in other regions of the world, generating the rapid expansion of existing national associations overseas or the creation of new ones. The composition of the Executive Committee, still dominated, for historical reasons, by members of the European associations, was not adjusted quickly enough to the changing situation, which led to a growing dissatisfaction among the non-European members. A second circumstance concerned the Honorary Presidents. They were all Europeans and remained member of the Executive Committee, albeit without voting rights. But because of their experience and the limit of eight years for the tenure of the other members, the impact of the Past Presidents upon the decision making process was relatively great, in any case considered too great by the overseas associations and generated irritation. A third circumstance was the decision, made by President Tortella, as late as May 1998, to transfer the location of the Congress from Seville to Madrid, due to the bankruptcy of the Seville organizing agency. Unfortunately, several scholars, in particular those from overseas, had already paid the subscription fee and had booked their flights and hotels, paying the bills of fee and hotels to the agency. Because President Tortella in person was financially responsible for the congress, he feared not to be able to reimburse these losses on top of the expenses to be made by him for organizing the transfer to Madrid. This fear led him to refuse a firm promise of reimbursement. The refusal infuriated those who had lost their money and a large number of others sympathized with them. As a matter of fact, many kept the whole Executive Committee responsible for the catastrophic situation and felt that the structure and leadership of the Association had

to be reorganized. The fourth and last circumstance was of American origin. Traditionally, the American Association had suggested mainly American Europeanists for membership of the Executive Committee: Shephard Clough, Frederic Lane, Rondo Cameron and David Landes, indeed, were all Europeanists, in line with the predominance of the European associations of Economic History during the first years of the International Association's activities. But the dynamic expansion of the discipline in the United States during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the initial success of the *New Economic History*, changed the situation. The American Association not only wanted to have the Executive Committee, as far as the American representation was concerned, manned more substantially by Americanists, but also to have a greater stake in the leadership of the International Association. Richard Sutch, Americanist and member of the Executive Committee, expressed the view of his Association on the matter in a speech at a Committee meetings in Madrid in the following terms: because Economic History was focusing increasingly on Contemporary History, on not-European topics and on methodological innovation, the center of gravity of the discipline had now clearly moved from Europe to the United States, which implied that the shift had to be translated into the leadership of the Association, in other words, it was time for having an American President in the near future and also time for an American Secretary General.

When, as chairman of the Nominating Committee, I had been consulting the national associations in view of getting good candidates to be proposed by the Executive Committee for election by the General Assembly, I also consulted the American Association. The Americans had accepted the idea of having the 2002 congress at Buenos Aires under the Presidency of Roberto Cortes Conde, but would be glad to have an American President in the not too distant future. They also had proposed Sam Williamson as candidate for being elected Secretary General for a term of eight years in replacement of Joseph Goy, whose term was expiring in 1998.

The Nominating Committee had already discussed the matter before the Madrid congress. There was a clear consensus that everybody would be very happy if the American Association would propose to organize the world congress of 2006 in the United States, which would imply that the Association's wish of having an American President in the near future would be fulfilled. With the candidacy of Sam Williamson for the function of Secretary General, however, the Nominating Committee made some reservations, the French Association having proposed a French candidate, Patrick Fridenson. The Committee considered both candidates very qualified, but expressed a slight preference for Fridenson for three reasons. Fridenson was multilingual, Williamson was not. This was a sensitive issue for the French, because the French wanted to maintain French as the second language of the Executive Committee, as has been the case during the previous years, and as second language of the congresses too. A much more important argument, however, was of a financial nature. A French Secretary General, indeed, would have his administrative premises in the *Ecole des Sciences Sociales* in Paris, which would finance all the administrative costs of the Secretariat. If Williamson was elected, however, the International Association would have to pay the costs. A third and last argument was one of geographical balance. It had been decided by the Nominating Committee that an Australian scholar, Chris Lloyd, would be proposed as treasurer of the Association, Furthermore, a South-American scholar would be proposed as next President and maybe would be succeeded by an American President (as indeed would be the case). If Williamson, an American scholar, would become Secretary-General, the result would be that in the eight years to come no European economic historian would be a

member of the *Bureau* of the Executive Committee, a body made up by the President, the Secretary General and the treasurer. This situation would create, in the opinion of the Nominating Committee, an undesirable unbalance, the European associations remaining at that moment still predominant in the membership of the International Association.

During the discussion of the report of the Nominating Committee at the Executive Committee both the French and the American delegates maintained their positions. A vote therefore had to force the decision: Fridenson obtained ten votes, Williamson five. Sutch reacted that he could not accept the vote: if Williamson was not proposed for election, the American Association, together with a number of overseas associations, would leave the International Association and found a separate International Association.

As chairman, having led the negotiations with the national associations, I had foreseen the deadlock, and, therefore, had included in my report a scenario of escape, hoping to make the way free for a consensus. The candidate, receiving the majority of the votes in the Executive Committee, would withdraw and a third candidate would be proposed to the General Assembly. Before leaving for Madrid I had contacted Jan Luiten van Zanden from the Netherlands, asking him whether he would agree to be that candidate. Van Zanden, after a while, had agreed, hoping that the Dutch National Foundation of Scientific Research would keep a vague promise to finance the costs of the Secretariat. Fridenson agreed to withdraw and van Zanden was proposed by the Executive Committee as its candidate for the function of Secretary General. At the General Assembly he was elected.

When consulting the national associations, I had also felt that some of them were dissatisfied with the actual structure of the International Association and with the format of the congresses. I had, therefore, included in my report also a proposal for setting up a Reform Committee, which would examine to what extent the structure of the Association and the format of the congresses should be revised and adapted to the changes in the recent development of the discipline. I suggested, moreover, that Sutch would be elected chairman, which implied that an American would already be, for the coming four years, a member of the *Bureau*. The proposal was accepted too and a Reform Committee was installed by the General Assembly, under Sutch's chairmanship. At the General Assembly I also proposed to include Riitta Hjerpe, our actual President, as a member of the Reform Committee, a proposal which was, once again, accepted by the General Assembly.

The crisis of 1998 had a last, rather painful, aspect. Some overseas and some European members of the Executive Committee and General Assembly wanted the setting up of a special Commission to investigate the personal responsibility of President Tortella for the bankruptcy of the Seville organizing agency and for the financial losses, which had resulted from it for a number of scholars. Of course, those who attended the Madrid congress and had already paid their subscription fee to the bankrupt Seville agency, did not have to pay again for the Madrid congress. Part of the hotel costs would be refunded too, but the remaining part and some other costs, mainly tickets for travelling by air, were lost. The General Assembly, however, arguing that the President had done his best to save the congress, by organizing it in extremis in Madrid, decided to drop the case.

In the following years the Reform Committee and the new Executive Committee would prepare a substantial revision of the statutes and the changes in the format of the congresses. Their proposals were approved by the General Assembly at Buenos Aires in 2002. Those who took care of the revision are much better placed, than me, to tell this story in more detail.

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